

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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October 4, 2006

Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr. (Ret.)  
Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
14<sup>th</sup> Street and Constitution Avenue, NW  
Room 5128  
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Admiral Lautenbacher:

Last week, *Nature* magazine reported on a troubling situation in your agency involving the suppression of science. This is just the latest in a long string of such stories that have appeared this year in the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New Republic* and, just two weeks ago, *Salon.com*. Those earlier stories all involved efforts at NOAA, or by Commerce officials interfering with NOAA, to shape the kind of information that reached the public regarding climate change and more-intense hurricanes. In the *Nature* story, the chair of an internal NOAA panel working to produce a consensus statement on the role of climate change in hurricane science was instructed by an unidentified Commerce official not to release their work.

Only after a draft copy of that consensus statement was leaked, posted on the Climate Science Watch website, and reported on by *Nature*, did NOAA then publicly release an edited version of the consensus statement on its website. That occurred last Thursday, September 28, over four months after the scientific panel completed its work.

Just last April you wrote to the Chairman of the Science Committee with assurances that nothing would be done at NOAA to suppress the free discussion of scientific results. This letter came in the wake of an extraordinary e-mail you had sent to NOAA staff enunciating the same strict adherence to principle. Perhaps some in the Department of Commerce are unaware of your policy because it appears that the free discussion of scientific results with the public--and that is just what a consensus statement represents--is not supposed to occur.

This is unacceptable and I intend to get to the bottom of the situation at NOAA. I ask for your full cooperation every step of the way. I have seen a copy of an October 3, 2006, e-mail you sent to your staff reiterating your support for scientific debate and transparency. I am glad you share my belief in the importance of transparency as I have



some questions and requests of you to better understand the background to this situation.

In the interests of transparency, I ask that you provide me a copy of the e-mail of May 18, 2006, that instructed Dr. Ants Leetmaa not to distribute the product of his panel's work. I also ask for all the background e-mail that may have been exchanged between the Commerce Department official who was responsible for that May 18 e-mail and any other communications, in any form, between that official and other NOAA employees or Department of Commerce employees related to the Hurricane FAQ (in whatever form or by whatever title it was known).

I also desire more detail on the composition of the consensus panel and its charge. The *Nature* article suggests that you claimed that the consensus panel's work was merely an internal exercise to generate respectful communications within NOAA. That seems improbable to me and it is contradicted by your own October 3 e-mail. In that e-mail you discuss "an information sheet that was being prepared for this year's hurricane season rollout." Hurricane season starts on June 1, and so I would have expected that the Hurricane FAQ would have been released by NOAA by that date.

Apparently, NOAA was on track to release this Hurricane FAQ on time. My staff have learned that the Hurricane FAQ passed muster through a review by the NOAA Executive Council/NOAA Policy Council (NEC/NPC) on April 28, 2006. This panel includes representation from 19 line offices at NOAA, none of whom dissented from supporting the report. On May 11, an aide in your office sent an e-mail to other NOAA staff that reads:

"Attached are the response to the NEC/NEP comments and the final FAQ sheet. For the record, the final was approved by the Admiral and Scott Rayder. We will retain the DRAFT header until we receive clearance from the Department for use."

So, as of three weeks prior to the start of hurricane season, the draft report was ready to go as far as NOAA was concerned. And then the report entered a black hole at the Department. The *Nature* article indicates that one of your employees, Dr. Leetmaa, received an e-mail telling him not to distribute the FAQ and he never heard again from anyone regarding the state of the review. It was not until September 28, the same week that Climate Science Watch posted a draft of the FAQ on its web site and *Nature* published their story alleging suppression at Commerce, that you rushed this FAQ out the door.

It is hard to know how to come to any meaningful conclusion except that the Department of Commerce sat on this report in its review process. NOAA reviews had been completed by early May; only Commerce's review stood between this consensus report and the public. Your personal approval of its contents was apparently insufficient to see the report released.

I know you must be aware that releasing this report in a timely fashion was important to the credibility of your agency. In 2005, NOAA posted a web article on hurricane frequency and intensity that included a claim to represent a "consensus among NOAA hurricane researchers and forecasters." While the relevant paragraph appears innocuous in its discussion of natural fluctuations in the tropical multi-decadal



pattern, the subtext of labeling this position the "consensus" was to privilege those who argue human-induced global warming is not a factor in hurricane intensity or frequency. This privileging of climate change-hurricane intensity deniers has been a recurring theme in the drumbeat of news stories that have come out regarding suppression at your agency. The subsequent push-back among scientists in your own agency regarding portraying this position as a "consensus" within NOAA in the on-line article led initially to the inclusion, belatedly, of an editor's note. That note reads in part,

"This consensus in this on-line magazine story represents the views of some NOAA hurricane researchers and forecasters, but does not necessarily represent the views of all NOAA scientists. It was not the intention of this article to discount the presence of a human-induced global warming element or to attempt to claim that such an element is not present. There is a robust, on-going discussion on hurricanes and climate change within NOAA and the scientific community."

I assume that the next step in working to placate those who objected to NOAA's public position on climate change and hurricanes was to establish a panel to work out a true consensus statement for NOAA scientists. That is what led to the 2006 Hurricane FAQ which you and the NEC/NEP ultimately approved. With officials at the Department of Commerce suppressing release of this true consensus statement, the old statement remained the position the public would find if they were searching for the advice of government experts regarding the relationship of climate change to global warming. The nation almost made it through an entire hurricane season before this true consensus document finally saw the light of day.

Because of the inconsistencies between your story as portrayed in *Nature* and the story implicit in your staffer's e-mail and Dr. Leetmaa's contention, I ask that you provide a detailed, written clarification of your position regarding the purpose behind the Hurricane FAQ. Please also explain why the report was blocked from public release for so long. Why do you believe it is appropriate for the Department of Commerce to look over your shoulder in editing scientific statements that have passed muster with 19 NOAA organizations as well as receiving your personal approval? Finally, provide copies of all communications you or your personal staff initiated in an effort to get the report cleared for release subsequent to May 11, 2006. In instances where such appeals occurred in person or by phone and there is no written record, please provide a comprehensive log of who you or your staff spoke with and on what date.

It would also be helpful to understand what the intent and thinking at NOAA was regarding these consensus statements. Please provide all records, in whatever form, related to the production of the original hurricane "consensus" article as well as all records, in whatever form, relating to the decision to establish a new panel, its working records and the records of all NOAA discussions regarding the work of that new panel. Also please include all materials that represent the progress through the 13-step approval process necessary for public releases as these relate both to the original report and to the statement produced by Dr. Leetmaa's panel.

Finally, you write in your e-mail to NOAA staff that "(m)edia reports have alleged that the document was blocked because it made a reference to work by NOAA scientists that found climate change may have an impact on increased hurricane activity. This charge is inaccurate." You then go on to say that the studies underlying the report are

publicly available so it would be useless to block the FAQ to achieve the goal of eliminating such references. However, you do not explain why the report was blocked.

I think that the American people are very concerned with reports of science at one agency after another being subjected to political pressure to suppress the public's access to sound science in deference to a politically preferred message. Fundamentally, I am baffled at the proliferation of non-scientists in public affairs offices—many of whom are political appointees with no scientific qualifications, but perfect partisan credentials—continuing to insert themselves into shaping what the public can hear from our federal scientists. I hope you will work with me to rectify this situation.

Please provide the above mentioned materials by Friday, October 13, 2006. Thank you for your attention to this request. You may contact Dan Pearson (202-225-6375) of my staff if you have any questions and to arrange delivery of materials.

Sincerely,



BART GORDON  
Ranking Member